

In Memoriam: Michael Charney (1911–1998)

STEVEN N. BYERS*

*Department of Anthropology, University of New Mexico,
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87131*

On May 2, 1998, Michael Charney died after a 2-month illness. His passing marks a loss of one more of the cohort of early scholars of American physical anthropology. This early scholarship started when Charney, as an undergraduate student at the University of Texas, was doing research at the Smithsonian Institution with several of his friends. While they were there, Aleš Hrdlička introduced himself and asked what they were doing. Charney immediately piped-up with a synopsis of their project with (as he described it) considerable bluster. The result of the meeting was that Hrdlička himself invited them to join the American Association of Physical Anthropologists, making Charney one of its earlier members. Those of us who knew Charney can easily see him not being intimidated by so imposing a figure as Hrdlička. Charney never seemed to experience a faint-hearted moment in his life, and this lack of timidity served him well throughout his career.

Over the years, Charney was employed in numerous capacities for such organizations as the Texas Rangers, the New York City Health Department, the US Army, and as an owner of a private blood laboratory. In addition, in the 1950s he attended Columbia University, learning under such scholars as L.C. Dunn and Theodosius Dobzansky. Unfortunately, he was unable to give these studies his full attention. Therefore, in 1965 at the age of 54, showing the audacity that was his hallmark, he decided to return full-time to biological anthropology. He enrolled in the Ph.D. program at the University of Colorado, where he studied under both Jack Kelso and Alice Brues. His dissertation was on the relationship between blood groups and asthma; originally it was fewer pages in length than A.L. Kroeber's, until Kelso and Brues made him lengthen it.

After graduation in 1969, Charney spent several years teaching at Idaho State University before joining the faculty at Colorado State University in Ft. Collins, Colorado. In 1976, just a few months after he was forced to retire due to his age, a massive thunderstorm caused a flash flood in the Big Thompson Canyon, south of where Charney lived. When he heard that the authorities believed that the bodies of most of the victims could not be identified, he displayed his usual grit and volunteered to help the Larimer County Coroner's Office. He eventually coordinated all identification efforts and, using his skills in human osteology, worked with a team that successfully identified all 139 persons. This was the impetus for his founding the Laboratory of Forensic Anthropology at Colorado State University at a time when most people would retire. From here, he served as a consultant to law enforcement agencies nationwide. It also was here that he did his research on face/skull superimposition, which led to the posthumous publication of a book.

In 1985, when the wife of a serviceman killed in the Vietnam War approached him concerning the identification of her husband, Charney discovered that the US Army's Central Identification Laboratory (CILHI) was making positive identifications from insufficient skeletal material. Never one to shy from a fight or to address a wrong, he and George Gill brought the problem to national attention. Through his persistent criticism, CILHI was forced to accept inspection of their work by a team of scientists who

*Correspondence to: Steven N. Byers, Department of Anthropology, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131-1086. Tel: (505) 277-4524. Fax: (505) 277-0874. E-mail: SBYERS@prism.santa-fe.cc.nm.us

Received 24 June 1998; accepted 6 July 1998.

eventually resolved the issues. Although some condemned him for his sometimes abrasive approach, the simple fact is that the problems at CILHI might still be continuing today if Charney had not taken on the fight.

Despite the above accomplishments, Michael Charney was devoted to students more than to any other aspect of his work. Indeed, he felt educating *was* his work. He regularly gave his home telephone number to his students so that they could contact him at night if they had questions. He had an open invitation for Sunday morning breakfast at his house; those who went found him to be a gracious host who welcomed that which most of us would feel was an intrusion. The door to his office was always open, and he would stop everything he was doing and devote his attention to anyone who walked in. He would do anything for a student, including providing a place to live in his own home, if needed (as happened to me one quarter toward the end of my studies). Finally, to a few of us who were lucky, he was not merely a teacher. He was a mentor. He did not just teach a class; he taught individual students. He did not just deal with the academic aspects of anthropology; he demonstrated how anthropologists thought and acted. He did not just answer questions; he presented a philosophical framework for learning. He was the guardian of our intellectual development. This kind of devotion is rare in academia, and it is a loss that cannot be replaced.

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF MICHAEL CHARNEY

- 1955 The training of medical laboratory technicians. *Bull. New Jersey Acad. Sci.* 1:1-2.
- 1958 The sword and the horse in the iron age. *Bull. New Jersey Acad. Sci.* 3:9-10.
- 1960 ABO bone typing of 100 pre-Columbian American Indians. *Am. J. Phys. Anthropol.* 18:335-336 (abstract).
- 1968 100% hemoglobin C in a white family: a three generational study. *Bull. Colorado-Wyoming Acad. Sci.* 6:4-5.
- 1971a Intestinal lactase deficiency in adult nonhuman primates: implications for selection pressures in man. *Soc. Biol.* 18:416-421.
- 1971b Physical anthropology: a science in the service of police. *Peace Officers News and Training Bulletin*, Pocatello, Idaho. 14:57.
- 1972a Disaster identification: a case in applied physical anthropology. *Tebiwa* 15:15-16.
- 1972b Mistaken early man in Idaho. *Tebiwa* 15:68-69.
- 1973 Milk intolerance in American Indians. *The Indian Historian* 6:17, 42.
- 1974a Controls in Colorado for blood group studies. *Bull. Colorado-Wyoming Acad. Sci.* 8:3.
- 1974b Individual identification from human skeletal material. In CG Wilber (ed.): *Forensic Biology for the Law Enforcement Officer*. Springfield: CC Thomas, pp. 228-332.
- 1975a A pre-European Polynesian school of navigation. *The Ensign* 63:26-27.
- 1975b Violence in other cultures. In CG Wilber (ed.): *Contemporary Violence*. Springfield: CC Thomas, pp. 31-44.
- 1976 Drug addiction and the police: the anthropological perspective. *Denver Post*, Sunday, April 18 (editorial).
- 1978a Forensic anthropology. In D Nash (ed.): *Individual Identification and the Law Enforcement Officer*. Springfield: CC Thomas, pp. 67-91.
- 1978b Forensic odontology. In D Nash (ed.): *Individual Identification and the Law Enforcement Officer*. Springfield: CC Thomas, pp. 92-105.
- 1978c The temporary morgue and identification of bodies. *Police Chief* 45:285-288.
- 1980a Disaster planning: organization and operation of a temporary morgue. *Police Chief* 47:66-67.
- 1980b Charney M and Wilber CG. The big Thompson flood. *Am. J. Forensic Med. Pathol.* 1:139-144.
- 1980c Chacun a son expertise. *Actes du XX Congress International D'Anthropologie et D'Archeologie Perhistorique*, Cagliari, 9-12 October, pp. 184-185.
- 1985 Human identification: case studies in forensic anthropology. *The Colorado Policeman* 22:67-71.
- 1986 Is this bloodstain human in origin: a five minute test. *The Colorado Policeman* 23:55-56.
- 1987 The temporary morgue operation. *Proceedings of the Tenth Anniversary Conference on What Have We Learned Since the Big Thompson Flood*, July 17-19, Boulder, Colorado.
- 1991 Nickerson BA, Fitzhorn PA, Koch SK, and Charney M. A methodology for near-optimal computational superimposition of two-dimensional digital facial photographs and three-dimensional cranial surfaces meshes. *J. Forensic Sci.* 36:480-500 (with three co-authors).